

THE AFRICAN CHOREOGRAPHER'S PROBLEMS

by A.M. Opoku*

As an art form, the dance is also a language which uses movements to express ideas. The putting together of carefully selected movements which express clear ideas, a style or character combined with form, is called choreography. It is like writing an essay, or a composition, on a given idea, feeling or thought. To compose dances or create movements which have meaning, music, costume, setting and other factors relative to the theme of the dance must be considered. In Africa, the dance is linked to the music or rhythm of drums, voices, instruments, mimed gestures. The setting has the village as a background. There is the attention given to the costume and other decorations. All these combine to create a definite mood or express ideas that are shared by the community. There is not the same insistence on the dance telling a story.

However, modern African society has adopted certain attitudes and techniques from Europe and for this new society, the choreographer in his society has to compose in movement terms which are based on the old structure, but can be understood and appreciated by modern audiences. Thus the modern African choreographer is composing within the grammar of the dance language of his people, making allowances for new constructions, meanings and a richer and more extended vocabulary. Dance uses movements as words and just as words change in meaning and usage so also do movements change their original meaning. Again new words are always making a living language richer in vocabulary and extending the range of expression and communication. Modern African societies have learnt new movements in a like

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manner and have either modified or forgotten some movements in the process. To illustrate, consider the movements called into play in the use of the African hoe, first, as a tool for weeding. With feet wide apart and knees relaxed, the farmer bends down with his left hand above the hoe, and his right hand holding the handle, he makes contact with the ground with the left hand guiding the hoe, then both arms are pulled in with a scraping movement towards the gap between the parted legs. As he takes a step forward, the body is raised slightly, arms are raised and extended forward, then the body assumes the first position, the hoe being brought down to make another contact a foot or so ahead of the original spot. These movements are made with such rhythmic regularity they invite a suitable song which becomes a part of a common everyday activity. For clearing roots, both hands grasp the handle of the hoe firmly and the body is raised higher and the hoe is brought down with force followed by a pull on the hoe towards the farmer. In making yam mounds, the movements are quick and fluid almost like modelling in clay with flexible twists of the wrists and the body. Now children attending schools, especially in the urban areas may never see these movements and in a few years movements done in mime to represent the planting of yams would have been forgotten. Movements made with a lawn mower are more familiar to these children than the movements made by the grass cutters with cutting tools fashioned out of barrel hoops.

Choreography means more than arranging dance steps. Putting steps together is like prose. Choreography is poetry expressed with movements of the body; there must be long and short movements to provide definite rhythmic patterns and modes just as one feels on reciting a great poem. The theme should have a beginning, a middle or main body and a significant ending;

having decided the form, an appropriate style is selected to express the idea in terms which should make the meaning crystal clear.

The choreographer who is a poet in his use of movements, must be emotionally, mentally and physically equipped to translate his experiences and the life around him into movement images through the use of gestures, mime and body movements. He must be observant and perceptive both emotionally and mentally. He must think and feel in visual terms. In Euro-American countries, he does not need to be a great dancer; but in Africa where every great dancer is his own choreographer, he needs to be more than a competent dancer partly because, even group dances give great scope for individual expression and such group dances are thereby enriched by individual contributions which may change the style if not the form of the dance. The African dancer, as a creator and interpreter, seeks to inform the heart or to appeal to emotion through the eyes. This for us is more natural than the Euro-American practice of separating the dancer, the interpreter, from the choreographer, the creator. What we must aim at then is training of the new generation of dancers as dancer-choreographers. This might raise the question as to what happens when they have to dance together? The answer lies in the practice of German musicians meeting to play Kammer and Haus Musik composed by one or other of them. It is for this reason that right at the beginning of the Diploma Course, we had to learn various dances in order to acquire a repertory of significant movements from the study of African dance. What emerges from the creative study of those dances will, it is to be hoped, be totally different creations which have their roots not in one particular regional dance form or style but will have a broader base, drawing on material from all the regions of Ghana and the rest of Africa, thus reflecting the realities of the modern trend of seeking to be welded into one nation although we may have regional and social differences.

Purists who might object to such an approach forget that they are being merely sentimental. Within the last year, the Kpanlogo has swept the country. It is a dance creation but its component style is Ga. These are a combination of secular dance movements and the gestures are from the religious dances like Kple and La kpa linked with lively clowning for the fun of it. In different parts of the country, unknown choreographers have created dances in like manner from time to time. Konkoma was such another dance. Konkoma movements were absorbed into 'See There' and Ahyiwa and other dance styles. Some of these movements are discernible in modified forms in the highlife and the Kpanlogo.

Again it was the practice, among the Ashantis and Brongs, for the youth to set up youth councils in wards. The youth, for their entertainment, created their own dance forms, with their own creative drum rhythms and songs. Sometimes, the older generation adopted these new dances. Certainly the dances grew with their creators. Some of the best like Adowa, which borrowed much from the Kete, Akapoma and Densewu, have become national. In the case of Adowa, it has even a Ga and Fante form in addition to the Ashanti version. Sometimes at the funeral of an old man, other old men who had grown up with him bring out such parts of their drum ensemble as had been in their possession since their youth, to try to recreate the comradeship formed in their younger days. In some instances a newer generation has been captivated by the drumming and taken it up again. Sikyi is an example of a recreational dance which has staged a come-back with its sister dance Odiwaa or (A)sa aboa (Saaboa) in Ashanti recently.

Another approach adopted by African choreographers is the introduction of new movements collected during travels to other regions and, of course, regions which are neighbours tend to borrow one from the other. The people of Ada, living in an area between the Gas and the Ewes, have created the Kpatsa which uses a happy fusion of both styles of dances. The choreographer's competence in dance and perception are needed in seeking to infuse new ideas into

an existing style so as to present the form of the dance with its new movement vocabulary, in an acceptable form. The *Sohu*, as danced by the Ghana Dance Ensemble, has been extended by using material from other *Yewe* dances, body movements, leg and arm gestures and symbolism. In addition, *Sikiyi* movements from the *Twi*-speaking areas, which were suggested by the music and movements as being related, have been introduced in the composition for contrast, variety, and depth. Yet another suggested approach is to bring together dances used in festivities in connection with local or regional festivals. An example of this is the local harvest festival of the *Lobi*, the *Sebire* - introduces *Koobena*, *Boobena* and concludes the festival weeks later with grand performances of *Sebire*. For modern audiences each dance might hold the attention for a few minutes; to make them more meaningful, interesting, and at the same time more lucid. The Ghana Dance Ensemble, after much research and careful study of each of the dances taught by *Lobi* musicians and dancers, especially invited from the region, omitted repetitions by individuals and created the *Lobi Dance Suite of Work and Happiness*. By introducing the working songs and working movements of the people of the region, the audience is made aware of the every day life of the *Lobis*, at work and play. Lamentations for dead fighters also falls into this category. The theme was suggested by a description, (by Mr. Seth Ladzekpo) of a funeral practice among the members of the *Yeve* cult for a priest. The dance type for this ceremony, the *Husago* is grave, deeply moving and dignified. African funerals have a tendency to depict sorrow and gaiety sometimes alternately and at times simultaneously. The use of an *a, b, a,* form was indicated using the slow funeral *Husago* for *a*, and the *Akyea* for the *b*. The composition begins with the priests, priestess and neophytes chanting in procession to the shrine. The drums intone dolefully the critical condition of the dying priest and the congregation and three priestesses fall prostrate on the ground. The chief senses that the sick priest has died and communicates it to the priestesses who rush off screaming to return shortly afterwards to introduce the *Husago* dance. The *Akyea* follows as an expression

of faith that life on this and the other world goes on and that the departed priest is yet another link between his comrades and those who have gone before. But the thought of not seeing him physically, in facing life together, brings sorrow and the Husago returns; and the priests and priestess or heroes and heroines in this case, lead the procession to prepare for the burial. The success of this dance creation both in Europe and during the Dakar Festival can be attributed to the contrasts in the loudness of the drums in Akyea and the muted drumming dying away in the Husago in which the echo technique of sounding the gong is used; the mood is expressed in appropriate costumes in sombre colours against subdued lighting background.

A need of the use of modern production methods can do much to bring the many factors represented in the dance into a coherent unity of expression of the theme as felt by the choreographer, the dancers and any audience who may be present. The following notes jotted down when the composition was still an idea, might illustrate the point about the totality of dance composition in the use of elements connected with the dance and the processes of choreographic composition.

Dance Dirge To Freedom Fighters - NOTES

Music and Dances:- Husago and Akyea Motifs.

Darkened stage with drummers and drums in silhouette. Fetish bells - sound softly - a song to Yeve gong played on the thighs to create echoes, this is joined by others in series in a polyrhythmic build-up. Enter procession singing - walking gesture step with arms folding across and opening. Priests and priestesses in centre of procession - formation chorus grouped round drummers. Priests in front of chorus, priestesses standing in front of priest, younger priests etc.

arranged in groups to form semicircle. Sound of drums - all fall on their knees except priests. At sign from chief priest - priestesses scream running off stage wringing their hands. Husago bells - slow grave at first faint then sounding nearer. Enter priestesses singing 'lala me lo', chorus respond. Lament by priestesses chorus respond with body movements rocking from side to side and contracting and releasing the torso in prostrate posture. Finally the figure leads into Husago - male female partners alternately taking symbolic expressions of sorrow and deep emotion.

II (B) The Akyea - sometimes sad and tender, then wild strong and gay.

III Husago circle (short with full gong and drums, drums leave off one by one till only gongs are heard. These grow fainter and fainter as the circle leads in to procession for the exit.

It must be remembered that the African choreographer has tended to express his ideas in the form of proverbs or maxims or potted wisdom. Although proverbs are short they invoke deep thought which would fill several pages if written down. In a like manner the very brevity of statement and the intelligent selection of salient movements and music has aroused emotions and by association and recollection achieved a similar effect as the spoken proverb. The modern African, long divorced from his history, culture and environment and even the correct and effective use of his own language by prevailing educational systems, often fails to understand African proverbs. Even parables sometimes confound him. A narrative approach would seem to be the best way of communicating with him and what better thematic material could a choreographer select for his creations than the wealth of oral literature. It is only now that modern African writers are beginning to discover the value of local legends, parables. Kurt Joos's *Seven Heroes* is a German tale; Wagner used German legends as material for his operas

and Petrouska, and Firebird are Russian stories. And one must not forget that Shera Hazade is based on themes from the Arabian Nights. Among other things, the older generation evolved the dance mime diversions in story telling and the budding choreographer can after careful study of the various regional forms, model his initial exercises on these forms. To do this successfully, he must have the sensitivity and insight for what is dramatic and should be musical if not a musician. Some training in African drumming and African music is necessary for the young African choreographer. African composers of music have tended to specialise in music for concert presentation. One of the major obstacles the young choreographer has to face in Ghana, is that of having the right kind of music from his musical counterpart. It might be stated here that some of the best known Euro-American composers did not think it was beneath their dignity to write music for the dance and for the theatre; African composers too would serve our interest best by studying the relationship between the drum patterns in their polyrhythmic combination with the melodic structures in African musical forms. Perhaps apart from traditional composers, the guitar bands seem to be the only modern group of composers in the African idiom who can marry words to melody and melody to drum and percussive patterns, to make one wish to dance. The young choreographer may therefore make a close study of the best of these for suitable material. For example the humorous 'Oburoni W'awu' what miming would suit it? What would be its setting? A village street, a corner of a market with pedlars shouting and singing to attract buyers? Could one incorporate 'Everything cheapside cheapside, only two a penny in this theme? For closer study still the choreographer has the 'Concert Parties' as source materials.

These are a few ideas on the problems that an African choreographer has to face. He should remember that to be creative he has to have the courage of his convictions. A wise dancer-choreographer Kankyiren 'Bo said, "A dance form not rooted in the past, which is of the present only casting no shadow into the future dies with the generation that creates it".